

A PORTRAIT OF RICHARD BANISTER*

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RICHARD BANISTER deserves well from English ophthalmology. As the editor of the second edition of the English translation of Jacques Guillemeau's *Des Maladies de l'Oeil qui sont en Nombre de Cent Treize aux quelles il est Subject*, and the author of the *Breviary* attached to this edition, he is the first English Ophthalmographer of note. The *Breviary* is a valuable document on the practice of the early ophthalmologist in this country, and is of outstanding historical importance because of an almost incidental passage which gives the first account of hardness of the eye as a diagnostic and prognostic sign. An unpublished manuscript by Richard Banister in the Sloane Collection at the British Museum, discovered by R. R. James, constitutes a further claim on posterity, for it is rich in detail on the social aspect of early English ophthalmology. These aspects of Banister's activities have been recorded fully elsewhere (Sorsby, 1932 (a) and (b); James, 1933; Sorsby, 1933; James and Sorsby, 1934).

James has established that Richard Banister died in 1626. The place and date of his birth are, however, still unknown. As he was admitted to the Company of Barber Surgeons in 1602 and the *Breviary* is dated 1621, when he writes of himself that "it is not long to the period of my daies," he may be assumed that he was at least between 40 and 50 in 1621. This would put his date of birth somewhere at around 1570-80.

A portrait at the Royal College of Surgeons is of interest in that it gives us a likeness of Richard Banister and a definite date of birth—if the authenticity of this picture can be established.

The portrait

History. The Minutes of the Royal College of Surgeons contain the following entry dated June 10, 1841.

Mr. Stanley communicated at the request of Mr. Samuel Barton, of Manchester, a Member, that he Mr. Barton is in possession of an original Painting by Cornelius Jansen, in 1620, of Richard Banister, Author of Banister's *Breviary*; and that if it would be appreciated he would send it to be placed in the Library or Museum of the College.

* Received for Publication, April 17, 1948.

Resolved :

That Mr. Barton be informed that this Council are obliged by his liberal offer and will be much gratified by the possession of so interesting a Picture.

A month later, on July 8, the following Minute appears :

The Secretary laid before the Council for Mr. Barton of Manchester, the Portrait of Richard Banister mentioned to the Council by Mr. Stanley, at its last meeting.

Resolved :

That the best thanks of the Council be returned to Mr. Barton for such valuable Picture.

The portrait (Fig. 1) has a panel of 35 x 27 in. It has remained in the possession of the Royal College of Surgeons since 1841. In 1866 it was exhibited at the National Portrait Exhibition, when it was shown as a portrait of John Banister "a relative of Richard Banister," and ascribed to Cornelius Jansen. In Hallett's Catalogue of Portraits at the Royal College of Surgeons the portrait is given as that of Richard Banister painted by Van Ceulen; Banister's date of birth is given as 1585 and that of his death as 1633.

These dates and the ascription of the work to Van Ceulen are also given on the frame of the portrait hung in the hall of the College.

The Conflicting Data. It has been impossible to trace the history of the picture prior to its acceptance by the College in 1841. From the recorded data the picture might be either of Richard Banister or John Banister; and it would appear that its execution by Cornelius Johnson has not been questioned, for the different names mentioned all refer to the same significant contemporary of Van Dyck. None the less there is no reference to this picture in Finberg's extensive monograph on Cornelius Johnson. The available data therefore give no clear evidence as to the identity of the sitter or of the painter. There is in fact no evidence that it represents either Richard or John Banister.

The suggestion that the portrait represents John Banister can be clearly dismissed. There is a contemporary painting of John Banister in the Hunterian Library, Glasgow (Fig. 2) and this shows no facial (though possibly some family) resemblance to the sitter in this portrait. Moreover the picture carries the date of 1620 and gives the age of the sitter as fifty. Accepting these inscriptions on their face value John Banister must be ruled out for he was born in 1533 and died in 1610.

The possibility that the portrait does indeed represent Richard



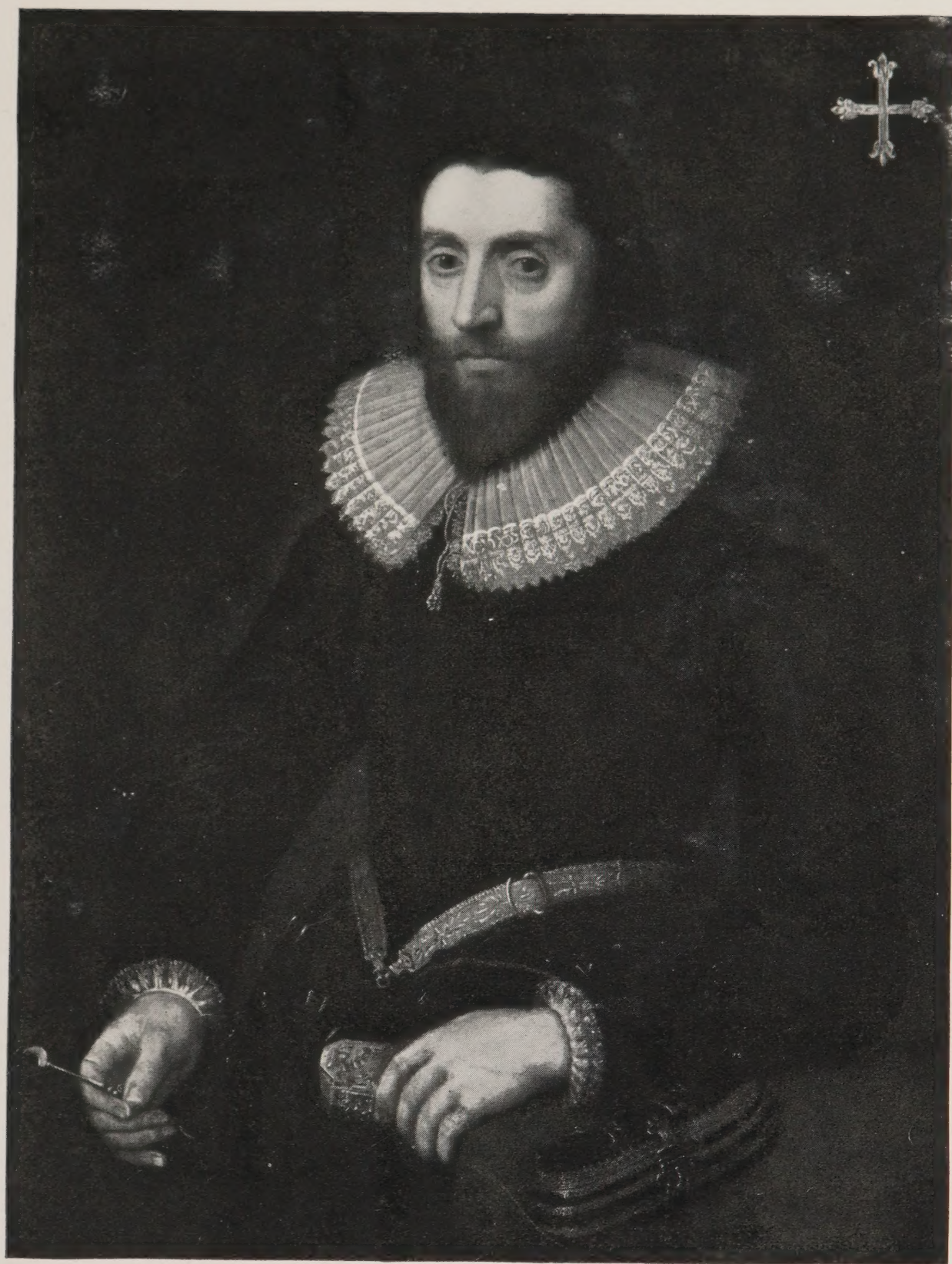


FIG. 1.

Photograph of a portrait of Richard Banister, Royal College of Surgeons.



FIG. 2.

John Banister delivering the Visceral Lecture at the Barber-Surgeons' Hall in 1581. (From a contemporary painting now in the Hunterian Library, Glasgow. D'Arcy Power, 1913).



FIG. 3.

Photograph of the inscription in the top left-hand corner of the portrait of Richard Banister.

Banister is not strengthened by what is known of his life. He was an itinerant oculist, and the highest civic distinction which he is known to have held was that of Churchwarden of Stamford. In his lifetime he was overshadowed by his famous uncle, and subsequently he became one of the forgotten figures of ophthalmology, though the fact that in 1841 Samuel Barton could regard the picture as of medical interest, and the Council of the College "were gratified by the possession of so interesting a Picture" suggests that his reputation was rather higher than present day memory would suggest. Still it remains an open question whether Richard Banister was of sufficient contemporary importance to have had a portrait executed—and that by an eminent painter.

Internal evidence from the portrait. These doubts are resolved by a study of the portrait itself, which brings out several things of importance:

(1) The inscription *Ats 50* in the top left-hand corner (Fig. 3) and of *1620* in the right-hand corner.

(2) The cross to the right of the inscription 1620.

(3) The box held in the sitter's left hand.

(4) The box at the side of his left hand.

(5) The instrument held in his right hand.

As for the two dates, authorities accept dates on portraits on their face value unless there is reason to doubt them. The fact that the shape of the ruff is that in fashion c. 1618-1632 (as Mr. C. K. Adams informs us) would justify accepting the validity of these inscriptions. Strong evidence that the sitter was a Banister comes from the cross in the right-hand corner. An illustration of this particular cross is given in Guillim's *A Display of Heraldry* (1638) under the designation of a cross flory. Edmonson's *A Complete Body of Heraldry* (1780) shows the arms of several branches of the Banister family; the arms of the Banisters of Leicester are given as a cross patonce, whilst those of another Banister without locality has the arms of a cross flory. The identification of the sitter as a Banister is further strengthened by the initials R.B. on the box at the side of the left hand, whilst the box held in that hand shows the first initial clearly, the second being covered by the hand. The possibility of the sitter being Richard Banister therefore becomes more tangible. If it could be proved that the instrument he holds in his right hand is a couching needle the evidence for the picture representing Richard Banister becomes fairly conclusive.

If the evidence for the identity of the sitter supports the traditional information on the picture, no such support can be obtained for the authenticity of the portrait as the work of Cornelius Johnson. On this technical issue we are obliged to Mr. C. K. Adams

for the following note, which he kindly prepared after studying the picture when it was removed from the frame and photographed.

"The portrait is a contemporary work having affinity to the work of native-born artists. It has been attributed to Cornelius Johnson. It is not, however, by such a skilled painter nor is the brushwork and colouring akin to his. It has suffered comparatively little at the hands of restorers and appears to be in all essentials, apart from the inscription, as originally painted.

The costume and type of ruff depicted are of between 1618 and 1632 and one might guess the sitter's age as being 45 or so. There is therefore no reason to question the date and age as inscribed on the portrait on these scores, though they have been very largely repainted. This is very apparent in the case of the A in "Ats" where there are now visible three cross strokes to the A and two down strokes on the left hand side. "Originally there was apparently a diphthong 'Æ' on a smaller scale than the more modern 'A.' The 'ts' is of the same date as this alteration. There is room for the whole word 'Ætatis' before '50' if written on the scale of the original 'Æ.' Part at least of the date 1620 is not the original paint as an old crack running down through the figure '2' has had to be made good on the surface to a width of half an inch. The '2' and half the '0' are certainly not original. Above the inscription 'Ats 50' and about half an inch away from the top edge there is a mark which is highly suggestive of an inscription which has been almost entirely scraped away. Insufficient is left to read even a single letter. The appurtenances such as the instrument which the sitter holds, and the instrument boxes, and also the initials on the boxes appear to be contemporary with the original painting."

It may therefore be accepted that the portrait does indeed represent Richard Banister and it follows that the date of birth can be placed at 1570. This fits in with the indirect evidence previously available. To the appreciation that the Council of the Royal College of Surgeons expressed to Samuel Barton in 1841 for presenting the picture to the College, posterity may now add its own thanks for preserving this picture as a national treasure. Samuel Barton had a double interest in the portrait. He himself was one of the early surgeons to the Manchester [Royal] Eye Hospital, to which he was appointed in 1815. He died in 1871 after achieving local distinction as an ophthalmic surgeon, and as an enthusiastic collector of pictures and engravings.

We are indebted to the President and the Council of the Royal College of Surgeons for permission to study this portrait and for publishing this note; to the Secretary of the College for kindly

tracing the relevant Minutes, and Mr. S. Wood of the Library staff for information on Cornelius Johnson. To Mr. C. K. Adams, Assistant to the Director of the National Portrait Gallery, we are greatly obliged for the trouble he has taken, and for his ready guidance. We are also indebted to Mr. F. N. L. Poynter and Mr. C. A. Earnshaw of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum for their interest and help. To Dr. O. M. Duthie and Dr. E. Bosdin Leech of Manchester we are obliged for their help in the fruitless search for the history of the portrait prior to its presentation to the Royal College of Surgeons.

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